

“Praxes of academic activism: exploring pluralities and perspectives”

Summary:

The performative imperatives of being and becoming a business school academic in contemporary neoliberal circumstances are fraught with critiques and contestations, especially when set against intense and urgent calls to address global scale, societal and climactic crises. Within this context, there is a plurality of ways in which academics attempt to challenge, resist, and de-construct in order to re-construct possibilities for futures which embody sustainable sensitivities and action. However, the literature has not yet documented this plurality, so this workshop aims to collate and map the alternative praxes of academic activism, that is, the different perspectives and possibilities of how theory-practice is imbricated and expressed in practice. This participatory workshop invites and welcomes a range of scholars to experiment and explore the praxes of academic activism in a supportive environment, and consider future individual and collaborative agendas and acts.

Track Critical Management Studies

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Context: *respons-ability* amidst higher performance

Contemporary conditions of being and becoming an academic are not only plagued by embodied pressures for (high) performance against a wide set of agendas (Wall and Perrin, 2015), they are now also set against a “resurgence of nationalism and right-wing politics... [b]ringing in its wake the worrying manifestations of racism, xenophobia and anti-intellectualism” (Bristow and Robinson, 2018: 636). Such contexts reinvigorate critiques and contestations around the nature and purpose of business schools and those who work within them (e.g. Ghoshal, 2005), especially in relation to embracing responsible and ethical behaviour within a wider landscape of contemporary challenges such as inequality (Blasco, 2015). Here, there is increasing appreciation – if not a direct call to heighten such appreciation amidst demands for high and higher performance – of affection and passion as a driver for academics to intentionally shake power structures and inequalities in society (Shrivastava, 2010; Wall et al 2019).

As Cunliffe articulates, the work of academics is “intricately interwoven with who we are... and ha[s] political consequences... [t]his struggle is both personal and ethical in the sense of requiring us to be *respons-able* for ourselves and others” (2018: 8, emphasis added). As such, *respons-ability* manifests in ways that are set within a complex and hyper-political site fraught with competing risks, contradictions, and double-binds in competing performative agendas (Griffin et al, 2015; Bristow et al, 2017; Cunliffe, 2018). Here, academic activism refers to the ways in which academics confront, challenge, resist, and pre/re-configure (Rhodes et al, 2018); it is, in a sense, the way they politely ‘light a candle’ to spark action in others, or take public social action to ‘burn The State’ towards new possibilities for alternative futures which embody sustainable sensitivities and behaviour. Or more precisely, futures which de- or re- construct more integrated conceptualisations or meta-narratives of being and becoming in the world which re-position people-profit-planet and the dominant sub-categories embedded within (Wall et al, 2019).

When the purpose of academic activism is cast in this way, there appears to be a plurality of responses that academics pursue which go beyond the intentionally disruptive ‘journal paper’, and which challenge them to find alternative *respons-able* pathways of action (Wall, 2016; Parker and Parker, 2017). Examples of such pathways include (1) academics designing pedagogical structures inspired by pro-social action from the 1960s and 1970s such as service learning (Wall et al 2019), (2) academic re-visioning of business school organisational structures which prompt integrated forms of personality development oriented towards ethics and sustainability (Akrivou and Bradbury-Huang, 2015), (3) academics openly critiquing and challenging the practices of business schools and universities (Callahan, 2018; Parker, 2018), (4) academics engaging in social action in public spaces (Reinecke, 2018); and (5) academics taking moments to express resistance throughout their career but at the everyday level but (Bristow et al, 2017; Wall, 2016).

Purpose: exploring pluralities, perspectives, and possibilities

Whilst there is a plurality in how academics respond to these contemporary circumstances there is, to date, little work to document the plurality of ways in which academic activism is expressed or is manifest, and as such, the associated praxes which underpin and inform academic activism. Therefore, the overarching aim of this workshop is to purposively map and document the plurality/diversity of academic activism praxes as a repository to stimulate ongoing reflection and action. Here, we understand praxes of academic activism to be the imbrication of theory-practice across a wide range of disciplinary boundaries. As such, the workshop will facilitate discursive sense-making and elucidation of different types and forms of academic activism, including, but not limited to, different levels (e.g. micro, meso, or

macro levels) and/or different theoretical perspectives (e.g. political theory, critical theory, psychoanalysis, aesthetics, and so on). Through facilitated open dialogue, we will seek a vibrant diversity of ideas and experiences, presented in the clear and simple language of C. Wright Mills' "ready intelligibility" (1959, p. 218) to prompt sharing, combining, integrating, and inspiring new ideas around academic activism for further development. The specific configuration of the workshop is outlined below.

Format: collating and exploring acts of activism

Within the context of this broader aim, the workshop will involve participants working together to explore the pluralities, perspectives, and possibilities related to academic activism. During the 1.5 hour workshop, there will be three main elements:

- (1) an experimental-experiential performance element, where the facilitators and participants collaborate and share up to three micro-performance experiments to stimulate embodied as well as intellectual forms of dialogue (for instance, experimenting with alternative/simpler writing forms, verbal vignettes, visual imagery, culture jamming, live art, etc)
- (2) an open dialogic element exploring the experimental-experiential performance element to facilitate the elucidation and mapping of the different types and forms of academic activism
- (3) an element for exploring and mapping individual and collective agendas for developing the praxes of academic activism (including how participants may contribute to an edited book, papers, BAM2020 / EGOS2020 contributions, and any possible acts of academic activism).

The session will be facilitated by scholars who are currently active in exploring the praxes of academic activism but who are also experienced in dealing with collaborative and open space methodologies and action learning principles. Each participant will be invited to join a small group as part of the experimental-experiential performance element of the workshop, and they will choose a role they want to explore. This might be a role that they are comfortable with (e.g. observing from an outsider perspective), or a role where they feel a greater sense of risk as an insider to the act of academic activism. In either case, each individual participant will be involved in the workshop but the nature of this involvement will prompt different reflection and insight into the praxes of academic activism.

We would expect to attract around 10-20 participants in the workshop. The workshop will invite and welcome a range of scholars, and particularly those interested in exploring germane areas of scholarly work, passion, and their own academic activism within organisational life. The ideal configuration of the space would be a clear open space to allow movement in and around it (to perform or display acts of activism), with chairs that could be placed in a circle for the dialogic aspects but also moved for the performance elements of the workshop. However, it would also be possible to undertake the workshop in a standard lecture style if required as long as the shape of the room allowed for dialogue in a group setting.

Importantly, the workshop facilitators are also the editors of a book which is being developed alongside this workshop, and collectively bring extensive experience as editors and reviewers from journals such as the Academy of Management Learning & Education, Management Learning, Leadership, Organization, Human Resource Development International, Human Resource Development Review, and the European Management Journal.

In turn we see three immediate developments as a result of the workshop:

- (1) a unique book within the sphere of ‘organisations and activism’ which aims to document the praxes of academic activism and its plurality (the initial proposal has already received positive feedback from a respected publisher),
- (2) the promotion and development of a contribution for future conferences (e.g. BAM2020 or EGOS2020 in Hamburg which speaks to the theme of ‘Organizing for a Sustainable Future: Responsibility, Renewal & Resistance’),
- (3) for those participants who are interested, a point of departure for expanding, exploring, or expressing academic activism in their own contexts and for building new activist networks and collaborations in a safe environment.

Emerging literature (Amis et al, 2018; Rhodes et al, 2018) and our recent interactions at various international conferences suggest that there is increasing interest in the topic of this workshop, and we expect this will include interest from experienced academics, early career researchers, as well as doctoral or post-doctoral researchers. However, we also believe that the wider collective outcomes outlined above will be particularly appealing to critical management studies participants in terms of experimenting with the topic of this workshop in a facilitated space with like-minded peers, as well as engaging with an opportunity to research and publish in this area with a wider, supportive network.

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